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ABSTRACT

Stories can have powerful effects on others. An autobiographical account of a behavior specialist's supposed descent into a severe emotional disturbance (SED) is presented here. Written as a narrative, the story opens with a description of what it is like to think differently from everyone else. It is conjectured that either the years spent by the author teaching emotionally disturbed children changed her and she began to see the world as her students saw it, or, that she somehow caught the SED "disease" from her students. The accompanying freedom from going "crazy" is described through analysis and through case studies. The narrative begins with the first day of school and the author's new job as a behavior specialist for SED children in a rural middle school. The insanity of job expectations and of the reactions of those around her are carefully depicted. The resultant role conflict, the labeling by peers, and the absurdity of numerous situations are explored. The narrative is sustained by the author's work with one SED student and the difficult and sometimes impossible situations in which she sees this student placed. The paper closes with a theoretical discussion of nonconformity. (RJM)

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Storying Moral Dimensions of Disordering: Teacher Inquiry into the Social Construction of Severe Emotional Disturbance

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Paper presented at AERA Annual Meeting
March, 1997--Chicago

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My Severe Emotional Disturbance

I am severely emotionally disturbed (That's SED). You may not believe me now, but you probably will before I'm finished. You should believe me on this one. I should know what severely emotionally disturbed is, I have taught students who were labeled severely emotionally disturbed for ten years and I have a Ph.D. in emotional disturbance. I should know one when I see one. And, I saw one this morning in the mirror, looking back at me wide-eyed with fear.

But you'll get to see my severe emotional disturbance for yourself because I am going to tell you some stories and my disturbance is visible in the stories. Ayers (1992) tells us that teachers tell their stories and in a powerful way their stories tell them. So while I am telling stories about schools, teachers, students, and relationships, my stories will be busy telling me.

You'll see the anger in them. I am an angry person. That's the first thing I saw when I read over the stories after I wrote them. I saw the anger there and it really upset me. I went into a panic when I read my stories. "Oh no!" I thought with terror when I saw its ugliness scattered all over those pages, there is anger spilling all over this thing. It's contaminated with my anger, my disturbance. Its making my craziness visible." I felt so ashamed. And I was blocked. I lapsed into a writers catatonia. My mind screamed at

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my hand, "WRITE!" but my hand did not write. I had there in my writing a glimpse of my own rage, my smoldering anger, clearly visible in descriptions of schools and systems and people. And I couldn't stand to look at it. .

I thought in my panic that I needed to go through my stories and extract the anger from them like a doctor might try to do with a cancerous growth. But I couldn't bring myself to even turn on the computer for days. I busied myself with rituals, cleaning, straightening, obsessing on the mundane. This neurotic reaction, this aversion, panic, guilt, shame, and fear are part of my disturbance. Evidence of it. My self-diagnosis was not reached based on my anger alone. Its true that my anger was the most visible to me at first, but once the idea began to infiltrate my thoughts, once I recognized my own disturbance telling itself to me in my stories, I began to see there was much more pathology there then I had recognized at a glimpse. I began to reflect on my life and my emotions and all the psychological diagnoses and school labels seemed to describe me. Honestly.

A big problem for me, psychologically speaking, is reality testing. Something has happened to me in recent years and the things I used to think were crazy seem sane to me now and the things I used to see as sane seem crazy. As a matter of fact, if you want to know the truth, my secret belief is that the students I work with, students who have been labeled severely emotionally disturbed, well, I've come to believe they are the sanest people in the whole school.

To tell you the truth, when I look into those rooms in the regular school and I see those kids sitting quietly in rows memorizing things like the periodic table, I feel scared about what goes on in those rooms. Why aren't those children protesting??? Why aren't they angry that they have to sit so long and memorize such things? Why aren't they cursing the teacher, turning over desks, walking out? These are behaviors I don't understand, these quietly sitting children, following rules, memorizing things that don't interest them. I secretly pray that my school never really takes "inclusion" seriously,

because I don't think I could make it in there. I am too afraid of the rows and the silence. And where in those tidy hallways of academia would my kids wrestle and dance and play?

Now that brings me to another problem. I am too attached to my students and over-protective of them. You'll definitely see that in my stories. My best friend tells me that she gets the image in my stories of an over-protective mother standing with her arms around her child shielding him or her from the world, saying, "My child hasn't done anything wrong, never, never, never. You leave my child alone." She says this mother cannot even hear what others say about her child. You'll see that in my writing. I'm sure. Its a clear case of neurotic attachment. But, to me, you know, to me the threat feels real. I think the children need to be protected from the system.

Now psychosis is another problem. I definitely hear things and see things that other people aren't hearing and seeing. Especially in schools. Often, when I say how I see something in schools, I can see people looking at me like I'm crazy. For example, I once sat in a meeting in an SED center and told a room full of people that I thought using the behavior modification system was immoral. I still believe this. I see it. I swear.

A room full of psychologists, social workers and teachers spent an hour trying to explain to me how it worked, to try to get me to see what they saw. But I kept seeing manipulation, control, and a heartless cruelty. I kept pointing out instances of what I saw, but I could see they didn't see it. I could also see that look in their eye, they thought I was crazy. I'm sure they talked about me once I left. But perhaps this is just the paranoia that is part of my disturbance. I did tell you my disturbance was severe. Right?

I can remember one staffing when every time I looked at the assistant principal he was staring at me with this look on his face like he was trying to figure out where the hell I was coming from. Then he'd look away embarrassed each time I caught him staring. It was like I caught him looking at a deformity or something. I can see it in their eyes. It gives me the creeps, you know, just walking through a school where you know they think

you're crazy. I guess this may be behind my school phobia. I have a strong fear of schools and administrators and I tend to exhibit a lot of avoidance behaviors when I'm in them Sometimes schools just seem too damn dangerous to me.

My depression over the last several years needs to be mentioned too. I went into therapy over this one. I got so mad about what I saw going on in schools, but I couldn't quite put my finger on why. I was always bothered by something or other; this rule, this policy, this look, this suspension. I'd get even more mad at the lectures telling me I had identified too closely with my students, that I was no longer being objective, that I needed to struggle to regain a professional distance, that I needed to stick closer to my role description, that I needed to fit in better with school culture and respect the school norms. I felt angry and helpless and I shut down and depression swooped down and clobbered me and gobbled me up. For years.

There's more. I am also, I think an anti-social personality. You could see how this would follow from the rest. I have a hard time seeing the purpose of so many of the rules. After a while, they become too hard to follow without any conviction, so I disregard them. This makes people furious. They have that rule about profanity. You know the kids aren't supposed to use profanity in the school. For a couple of years I tried to enforce that rule just because the school cared about it. I didn't. I am so angry, I need those words. They are the currency of anger. I mean, I use those forbidden words all the time. I just couldn't see punishing my students for it. They are angry too. But, that's all part of my anti-social personality. I hate those fucking rules!

Etiology or How This Happened to Me

In trying to understand how I became severely emotionally disturbed, I have stumbled upon two possible explanations. One comes from anthropology. Anthropologists warn us about going native, becoming too involved with a culture to be able to see it clearly. An anthropologist that has gone native sees with the natives, almost as if through their eyes. This is thought to interfere with the anthropologist being

objective. So a certain distance is supposed to be maintained and this is supposed to keep one's perspective from being influenced by the culture s he is studying.

Educators have an ideal of keeping a professional distance, too. We are taught to keep things impersonal with students. This is often seen in the taboo against telling students our first names. We are often encouraged to maintain this distance by intentionally dressing differently than the students, talking differently, and never disclosing anything about ourselves beyond our role.

I guess I've gone native. I have spent so many years in classes for students considered severely emotionally disturbed that I have begun to see things like they do. I've been told over and over again that I have identified too closely with my students, that I have come down to their level. Definitely my students see me as being like them, rather than being like a teacher. I mean I curse, I get mad, I don't follow the rules, I am distrustful of people in positions of authority and much of what goes on in schools makes me angry. So my students and I have a lot in common.

Another possibility is that I have caught the SED dis-ease. I never worried about it being contagious until one of my students wrote a paper about catching the SED disease from his neighbor, John--also in our class. He said he used to be a normal guy until he met John and then he started feeling funny. Pretty soon he was doing all kinds of crazy things. He wrote that the disease was fatal, had no known cure, and made you do and say things that shocked other people, but for some reason not yourself or anyone else who had the disease. I laughed at this creative essay. I had no idea that I would catch it too. But I must have, because I am no longer shocked by the things which other people see as crazy and the things they see as sane disturb me all the more. I wonder if he was right about the no known cure or being fatal part, too?

The Freedom of Being Crazy

There is something freeing in being crazy. No parameters. You know I think most of us walk around getting glimpses of our own craziness and we're afraid of being

exposed. That was how it was when I began to read my stories. I saw all this anger in them that I wasn't aware of in the writing. When I saw it I panicked because I thought you would see it and then my well kept secret would be out, a well-kept secret much like the one I suspect many of you have yourself. Rhodes (1977) says we have constructed the idea of normality to hide from ourselves our own sense of being crazy. He says the construct of normality is the ultimate defense mechanism to guard against our secret fears about ourselves. These secret fears were pulling at me when I read my stories and saw this deep red anger splattered everywhere. I felt exposed, even to myself.

At first, I didn't want to be exposed as a disturbed person. But, when I embraced the idea of disturbance, I felt a freedom in ways I have not felt often, a freedom to do and be who ever I wanted to be. I could now tell any stories I wanted. I was no longer concerned about carefully constructing stories that would conceal myself. I brought myself out and labeled myself and in that very powerful act took the power away from you to judge and condemn me. I'm crazy. I say so. Judge me all you want. I am no longer under the yoke of normality. I am no longer trying to live up to your standards or ideals. I have chosen to be crazy and now I am out of your reach. Do you think that this might be the reason some kids get crazy, too?

I could go on and on. But I want to tell you some stories. I just wanted you to know before I started that the stories are the rantings of a mad woman, nothing more and nothing less. You will see the insanity of my position, you'll see evidence of my psychosis, my depression, my anger, my neurosis, my personality disorder and my poor reality testing. I feel so relieved I don't have to try to hide it or extract it. You'll get to see how a severely emotionally disturbed human being sees her world and I think there is some value in this because it will help you understand other severely emotionally disturbed individuals and maybe you'll be more kind.

After telling my stories, I will talk a bit about theory. There are theories out there that make me feel a little less crazy, a little less despondent. If you are an educator who is

suffering from severe emotional disturbance, you might like these theories, too. They bring comfort to those of us who have lost our reason. But, if you are not disturbed already, you won't want to pay much attention to the theories I espouse because they will probably disturb you. These are theories only for people who are emotionally disturbed, people who are seeing things others don't see, hearing things others don't hear. These are stories for people who are suffering from school phobia, who are angry at what goes on in schools, who no longer feel compelled to follow the rules.

Making Children Invisible

So far I have been telling you about my own craziness in isolation, but the truth is my severe emotional disturbance flares up the worst in schools. So I must begin to weave my craziness into the context in which it is most evident, in which it is most aggravated.

The context of these stories is a rural middle school which I will call Greenland. I was employed there as a behavior specialist. In that role, I was supposed to get the kids in the school who owned the disturbance, those kids in whom the disturbance was located, to start acting like everyone else. I was supposed to get them to stop disturbing the other people in the school. This was told to me by the principal during my initial interview.

"What I need," she told me as she looked me straight in the eyes in an effort to see if I had the stamina to do such a thing, "Is someone who will keep those kids out of the main office, out of the hallways. I need someone who can handle the situations that arise without involving my assistant principal. She has spent almost her whole last two years here dealing with the problems of a handful of kids. She needs to be freed up. We have 1,300 other students here. I need someone who can keep those kids from being so visible, from disturbing the whole school." She said she didn't care how I did it, but if those kids were out of her hair, if I could at least keep them out of the office, well if I thought I could do that, then I had the job. So I took the job of trying to make the students in the SED classes invisible.

Brenda, the assistant principal agreed with all of this. She said she wanted to be free of those kids. Later I came to realize she needed those kids, but at the time I took what she said at face value. At this point, none of us knew who was crazy and who wasn't. But it didn't take long until the judgments of disturbance began to fly in all directions, leaving no one out of their reach. For me it started on the first day of school and continues, even now in my telling of these stories. Disturbance has been made and remade, cast and recast, located and relocated. In these stories it leaps from person to person, is found embedded in culture and system, and it might even reach out and touch you.

A Disturbing Day

Disturbance reared its ugly head on my first day at Greenland and never left me. It took me by storm in the first faculty meeting on my first day in that school. I sat there hopeful, eating some delicious food which was offered as a back to school celebration. I was excited, new job, new place, and in a few days I would be working with kids again. Then it happened, they began to tell us there was going to be a new dress code for teachers this year! They handed out a copy of an article about "Dressing for Success" which said in essence that if someone was in a position of authority and wanted to be respected by those under them, then they needed to dress the part.

I looked around me and saw some heads nodding in agreement and some bored expressions. One of the assistant principals walked back and forth like she was doing a fashion show. People laughed. I felt furious. I mean furious. I was a T-shirt and jeans kind of person. I got on the floor with kids, played football with them, and occasionally had to restrain them. But it wasn't even these functional aspects of my wardrobe that were so important to me, my clothes were a reflection of my value system, a reflection of me and that was being commandeered.

Honestly, I didn't hear the rest of the meeting. I sat there fuming in my chair, furious that something as personal as clothing was being dictated to me. But no one else

seemed mad. No one seemed to see this as a belittling act. Why did I see it that way? Why was I so emotionally disturbed by this news? Later when I went to my department where I was to meet the teachers and paraprofessionals I was going to work with for the coming year, I was still angry and I complained to them, loudly, about how ridiculous I found this idea and how angry I felt at being treated so disrespectfully.

I saw it in their eyes right then and there. They kind of stiffened and backed away a bit. Their eyes clouded over and I saw them sneak glances at each other from time to time to affirm their emerging appraisal of my inappropriate reaction. No they weren't crazy about the idea either, but they weren't bothered by it. Not like me. Months later I read a editorial in a Union Newsletter which temporarily bolstered my illusion of sanity. It read: "School problems: drugs, violence, and teenage pregnancy. School solution: dress the teachers better." Someone else thought it was absurd. I drew comfort, but it was not enough to prevent my eventual break with the school reality and escape into my own insanity.

Things got worse. There was this rumor going around that the county was going to prohibit the use of the level system due to some lawsuit somewhere or other. The teachers were in a frenzy trying to verify if this was true. I was delighted at the possibility. I have this very strong emotional reaction to behavior modification systems. Very strong. I hate them. I even see the watered down versions of reinforcement used in "regular education" as morally bankrupt forms of manipulation that rupture relationships and cause a tremendous amount of anger, resistance, and hurt. In short, I see them as abusive. So I got excited at the unlikely prospect that the district would outlaw this "device" of human control and said so.

The looks of mild surprise at my anger over the teachers' dress code gave way to incredulous indignation. All of the teachers let me know they were going to use a level system. During this conversation the teachers checked each other with their eyes, you

know what I mean? They were on the same wave length. I watched them confirm their own sanity with a glance and a knowing nod.

The icing on the cake, that first day came at lunch time. I met a regular education teacher who told me she felt sorry for me when she heard I would be working with the SED kids. "I don't think those kinds of kids belong in this school," she said. "I don't think the normal kids should have to put up with them. I can tell you one thing, I wouldn't want my daughter in a school that has an SED unit."

Role Conflict

Things got worse. The kids showed up and I was fascinated with them and they with me. You know what they say about birds of a feather, and all that. It was not long before we had our knowing glances and nods, too. I saw kindred spirits. The only glitch in the whole thing was my role and what people expected of me. I was supposed to get the kids to act differently then they typically did. I was supposed to get them to comply with the system, be respectful to their teachers, behave "appropriately." You can probably begin to see my difficulties here. In my insanity I began to see the students, the students who had been labeled the school systems most damnable label, severely emotionally disturbed, as emotionally healthy. And I began to see the school, the rules, the roles, the teachers, the administrators, as crazy. And so, I'm sure you know who I set out to try to change.

Lost in my own disturbance, I actually wanted to change how these teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals saw the kids (and consequently me). I got it into my crazy head that these adults were really the disturbed ones. I wanted them to see the craziness of trying to control students' behavior, the cruelty of asking children who were experiencing crises in their lives to act as if nothing was wrong, the cruelty of labeling them, the cruelty of manipulating them. Just like the kids, it was the school and many of its practices, policies and underlying beliefs I found disturbing.

Being Labeled by my Peers

During the first week of school I overheard the teachers I worked with discuss their informal group diagnosis of me. I had seen their judgments in their eyes that first day, but that was just a look. I could think I was imagining it. But within the first week their appraisal of my disturbance had been verbalized.

I had been called to deal with a student named Gary who was raising quite a lot of hell out in the hallway. He was threatening to pull down the bulletin board which was the responsibility of the SED department to maintain. One of the teachers had put all the names of the students who had birthdays in September who were in SED on it. Well Gary was one of those lucky children who had a September birthday and so a well meaning teacher had tried to honor his day by listing it there on the bulletin board in the SED wing of the school.

Gary had determined to tear that bulletin board apart. This kind of behavior can be expected of children who are severely emotionally disturbed. They have aggressive outbursts. You can see how this behavior is crazy, right? But I couldn't see it. I guess it was because I was crazy and I didn't know it.

I had to get Gary's attention so I stood in front of the bulletin board and told him I was the defender of the bulletin board and he'd have to put up his dukes and fight me straight up if he intended to tear it down. I was willing to die for its honor, I told him, as I began to dance like a butterfly, in a boxers stance, arms up protecting my face, taking jabs at the air.

Well Gary looked at me with complete shock, not knowing what to do. And then he put down his anger for a second and put up his dukes and played with me while several people who had gathered to watch Gary destroy the SED bulletin board looked on.

I wanted to know why he wanted to destroy the bulletin board so I asked him if he'd come into my office and talk. You see, sometimes there is a crazy logic that only we crazy people understand. Gary didn't want the whole school to know he was in SED. The

good intended gesture of love posting Gary's birthday on the SED bulletin board, made Gary feel exposed. It was there for the whole school to see. Gary Thompson, born on September, 9 1978 was Severely Emotionally Disturbed and oh yes! Happy Birthday to you Gary!

I felt for him, truly felt for him. I had seen the judgment that I was somehow defective too in those teachers eyes. I consoled myself with radical theories, with the prospect of getting a Ph.D., with a personal arrogance, and my defenses that I was normal and the rest of the world crazy if need be. But Gary felt exposed, his deepest fears proclaimed to the world in a happy birthday greeting conspicuously placed on the SED wing. How does one defend against that?

So I let him take his name down and then he went back to class. I felt pretty pleased with the whole thing. I was feeling like a behavior specialist of the highest rank. At the end of the day, I stayed late in my office doing paperwork and I heard the teachers I worked with talking in the next room. They were talking about me and what had happened with Gary in the morning.

"Can you believe it?" Maria asked the other two teachers, "She was out there dancing around in the hallway in front of all those kids and teachers?"

"She acts just like them," Tom said.

"Really," Connie chimed in, "How is she gonna help us get kids to act appropriately when she is so inappropriate herself."

I felt tears come to my eyes. I felt so misunderstood. Its very painful being crazy and not knowing it, because reality comes in, unexpected.

Crazy Stories or Stories about Craziness

Now I'm gonna shift gears. By now you are either convinced or not convinced that I am severely emotionally disturbed. Those of you who are disturbed yourself might even think I'm sane. I just had to make sure you know that I know that you know that I

am severely emotionally disturbed. I had to get past pretending that I was writing from some superhuman place called *normality*.

So now I want to tell stories about what I think is crazy in schools. I want to tell you some stories about a few of the crazy things I saw in one school in one year. I am not going to tell you all the things that happened in the school, just a few of the things I thought were crazy. No longer the voice of reason, this is the voice of unreason. I am constructing a very slanted view from a very disturbed position. Keep this in mind. I am turned inside out.

Mildred

I'll start with Mildred Tyler. Mildred didn't seem so much crazy as mean. She was a teacher's aid in the class for eighth grade SED. Mildred wore a scowl on her face as a rule that was rarely broken. She hated the kids and they hated her. Everyone complained about her; teachers, students and administrators. Mildred didn't hide the fact that she didn't like the kids. Once Mildred told me that a boy named Billy was "just plain white trash." But it was Dennis, she claimed to simply hate.

Mildred frequently would come running into my office in a frenzy and demand that I send Dennis home. One day during one of her tirades, Mildred put her finger in my face and told me that she hated Dennis. She said she knew I cared about him but she thought he was just plain mean and calculating, just no good. She said that in all of her years she had never worked with a kid like that. She had told the administration last year that she didn't want to be in the same room with him. And the whole time she was telling me this I was thinking in all my years I had never worked with anyone as mean as Mildred.

I asked Mildred how she thought she could work in Dennis' best interest if she hated him.

"Oh, he doesn't know I hate him. I bend over backwards for that kid. I treat him like everyone else. I never tell him I don't like him," she told me with an attitude of "of course I'm a professional!!"

"He knows you don't like him, Mildred. You tell him every day. Its in your eyes, your tone of voice, the things you say and do. Believe me Dennis knows. He has a long history of feeling hated. He understands very well what that looks like in someone's eyes," I said.

She told me she was just about fed up with him and that she knew what she could do about it. She said he had me wrapped around his little finger and I didn't even know it. With this Mildred's eyes filled with tears and she turned around and left the room. She slammed the door with all her might behind her. The teacher from the next room stuck her head out her door to see what was happening just in time to see Mildred stomping out of my office after exploding her anger against the door. I bet she had thought it was one of those damn SED kids again, only to see Mildred storming down the hall. Here was disturbance, emotional, severe, disturbance.

Mildred's Planning Period

To really get a sense of Mildred's craziness, you had to see her in action with the kids. One incident stands out in my mind above all. Alice was the teacher Mildred worked with. One day I had three of Alice's students with me during her planning period. We stopped by her classroom to get pencils and paper so they could write. The classroom door was locked so we knocked, but there was no answer.

"Isn't Ms. Tyler in there?" I asked.

"She's probably in there, but won't answer the door," Tim said.

"She does that all the time," Mike added.

"I think she'd answer the door if she was in there," I said, but the boys felt confident she was there. So we knocked again and called to Ms. Tyler to please open the door. Finally, I went across the hall and got my key and opened the door. At her desk, not

five feet from the door, Ms. Tyler sat coloring in a design sheet. She sat for hours coloring in very intricate designs that Alice had run off for the students to work on in their spare time. Not just me, nearly everyone thought it was a little crazy that Mildred got paid to color in designs. But it kept her busy, I guess, and off the kids backs, so no one said anything to her. Mildred had literally colored twenty or so sheets, each one taking hours to complete. They were displayed around the classroom.

Mildred didn't even look up as we entered the room. She had to have heard our entire conversation. I was amazed and stood there just staring at her in disbelief. I couldn't believe that the boys did not curse at her. I felt like doing it myself.

Dennis, using extreme self control asked her why she didn't answer the door. "Yeah," Gary chimed in, "You know you heard us."

She snapped at them and told them the last thing she needed was to have to put up them on her planning period.

"Planning for what?!?" I thought with amazement, "Is she planning what colors she'll use in her next design." Mildred didn't seem to realize that teacher's aids weren't even supposed to have planning periods. She was supposed to be assisting the coach with the boys in the gym. But long ago the coach had told her not to bother coming out. He realized that the boys were far more pleasant when she wasn't around.

"Bitch," Dennis whispered under his breath.

Billy looked at her with total disgust.

"Get your paper and pencils and lets go to my office," I said. I had to get away from Mildred Tyler, she disturbed my emotions severely.

Mildred and Alice

Alice was the novice teacher who had the bad fortune of working with Mildred Tyler. Alice was very petite. She stood about 4'11" and might have weighed 95 pounds. She was rather passive. She was married to a man who seemed to be a lot like Mildred. Once HRS had investigated the family when Alice's husband threw their daughter in the

pool and held her under in when he found out that she had sneaked out of their house at night. He had waited for her to sneak back in, ambushed her, threw her in the pool and dunked her under several times. He seemed to rule their home with an iron fist. Alice constantly covered for her daughter and kept things from her husband. She said he was too strict and she tried to make up for it. This same dynamic played out in the classroom with Alice and Mildred.

Alice was given an almost impossible situation: the toughest group of kids and the teacher's aid from hell. Alice and Mildred blamed each other for the problems in the classroom. They both complained about each other to Brenda, the assistant principal. Brenda had the two of them secretly documenting the others' every move under the assumption that action would be taken against the other. It was quite a mess and if I may be permitted to say so, more than a little bit crazy.

The students were in quite a bind. Mildred hated them and she had control of the point sheets. She used this system of stars and X's to punish the students. They hated her and retaliated in every possible way; they tore up her design sheets, spit on her desk, erased her programs in the computer, and cursed at her. She called their parents, took away their privileges, tried hard to get them suspended and often succeeded. They came back twice as mad.

Alice went through the motions of being a teacher but never made a connection. The boys weren't mean to her like they were to Mildred, they simply ignored her. On several occasions though, when she insisted they listen to her, Billy physically picked her up, carried her outside while she protested and placed her down outside the classroom door. The door locked automatically behind her. Sometimes Alice would come over and get me to let her back in, that is, if Mildred wasn't in the room or not in the mood to get out of her seat to open the door.

Now this was a crazy situation and I thought it would be good for Mildred and Alice to talk out their differences. I felt the kids were suffering greatly for the problems

between the adults. Both Alice and Mildred were furious at me for bringing this up. They acted like the best of friends to each other's face. They both denied complaining about the other and the meeting went nowhere. When it was over Alice complained to Brenda and said I had undermined her with Mildred. I was called in and chastised. I was told to never speak with a teacher and her subordinate at the same time! Now I thought this was crazy. The whole situation was crazy.

An Ethical Dilemma

In the beginning of the year I had worked hard with the boys to try to get them to cooperate with Mildred. I tried to get them to see her side of things. But as I began to see how strongly she disliked them and how completely disrespectfully she treated them, I began to feel it was unethical to push them to be respectful to someone who was abusive. The final straw came one day when the boys had been particularly rude to her and I had persuaded them to write letters of apology. At first they refused, but I convinced them.

Dennis was the last hold out. "I hate that bitch," Dennis seethed. "I don't care, I'd rather get suspended. I ain't apologizing to her. I ain't one bit sorry."

Dennis wrote a letter of apology to the clinic attendant because he had been rude to her, too. He didn't know her name so he put "To whom it may concern" at the top. Later on, when the other boys were handing their apology letters to Ms. Tyler, I urged Dennis to give her the one he had written for the clinic attendant.

"No," Dennis said with conviction, but when he got into the room he went over and erased "from your secret admirer" at the bottom of the note and put "from your obnoxious little friend" in its place. Then he walked over to Ms. Tyler and gave her the note. I felt so proud of him.

She read the first line and shoved the note back in Dennis' direction. "I will not accept this apology!" she said with venom.

"Why not?" I asked amazed once again.

"This is written to to whom it may concern," she said, "I have a name!"

Dennis threw the note on the floor and said, "Forget it, I ain't never apologizing to that bitch again!"

I picked up the note, rolled it in a ball, threw it into the garbage can near Mildred's desk, and walked out. I needed to get away from this woman. She wanted to be addressed by name. Well, I had some names for Mildred right on the tip of my tongue.

Once I stopped punishing the kids for retaliating against Mildred, Brenda got involved. She began to insist I suspend the students for being "disrespectful" to Mildred. She told me that there were plenty of people like Mildred Tyler in this world and those kids were going to just simply have to learn how to put up with her.

Brenda

Brenda, the assistant principal, was a big part of the craziness, too. Although by all accounts the department was running smoother than it ever had before, Brenda could not seem to stay away. We had very different styles of working with kids. Brenda seemed to expect me to punish students who broke rules in a show of power that would discourage any future infractions. One day as I watched her chastise an entire auditorium full of students and teachers, I realized that she literally used her power as an administrator to terrorize the school.

There had been an assembly in the cafeteria for the eighth graders. They had been getting pretty out of hand during their lunch period. Brenda assembled them all together and gave them hell. She told them that if they didn't start acting appropriately they would be walked to lunch in lines like first graders. If they didn't learn how to keep the noise level down in the cafeteria then there would be no talking at all. And the threats went on and on. When Brenda got ready to dismiss the students she told them she was going to give them a taste of what they had in store for them if they didn't shape up. So she dismissed them class by class and made them line up like elementary school children. She mocked them with her tone and words.

"Ms. Garrett's class you may stand up. Do not talk. Push in your chair and walk silently to the door. No talking. Hurry up. Now you may leave the cafeteria....Ms. Simms class you may stand up...." as Brenda barked out these commands the students looked wide-eyed at her and side-eyed at each other. One little boy took too long getting up and Brenda lit into him in front of two hundred other students and their teachers. "Johnny Suthers! Do you think this whole cafeteria full of students should have to wait for you while you take your sweet time picking up all of your things? You should have had that ready! Now because you want to be so slow and hold everyone up, your entire class can sit back down and go at the end so you can see what it feels like to wait on everybody else. Maybe next time you won't be so inconsiderate. Ms. Pearlman's class sit back down. You can thank Johnny Suthers for that," Brenda said as she glared at the boy who looked like he was close to tears.

I didn't know the unfortunate kid who moved too slowly, but I felt sick by what I saw. It was terrorist tactics witnessed by a group of teachers as well as students and I don't think it would be questioned because it was sanctioned by Brenda's role. I talked to Brenda after the assembly and she was hyped up. "I showed them, didn't I?" she said with an exaggerated bravado in her voice. "I can tell you one thing, we won't have any trouble with eighth grade lunch for a while." And she might have been right, just knowing that Brenda was capable of handing out that kind of humiliation kept most students and teachers in line. Except perhaps those teachers and students who were really crazy, severely emotionally disturbed.

The kids in the SED department seemed to play a role in the school similar to the one Johnny Suthers had played in that assembly. They were scapegoats of sorts, those children who had been singled out to bear the sins of everyone, to be made examples of. They had importance beyond themselves, importance in the system. They were examples of what could happen to you if you didn't conform, follow the rules, act appropriately. You could be labeled, separated out, and locked into a classroom with Mildred Tyler as

your warden. The SED students were a natural target. No matter what was done to them, they could always be blamed.

Dennis and Me

Now I am gong to tell you about Dennis, the boy Mildred hated, the worst kid she had ever worked with. He was a big boy for fourteen, over 6 feet tall and 230 pounds. He had a baby face, with handsome features, and very nice brown eyes that frequently changed and wore an intense anger and disgust for other human beings. His language was extremely vulgar at first. His anger was raw and frightening. He often used his size to overpower people by simply refusing to move. Other times he did crazy stuff, like spitting his food on the desk, knocking things over, and lighting things on fire in the classroom. I could see in the first few days what it was that disturbed others about Dennis' behavior and why they thought he really was SED.

After a few weeks, I began to realize that Dennis never really did inflict much damage. I think his tirades and threats acted as effective bluffs. I knew in order for Dennis and I to work together we would have to come to a different type of agreement. I watched him control his classroom and his teachers through intimidation. I knew I would eventually push Dennis to the limit and see what happened.

One day Dennis was sent to my office for acting up in class. He started riding my rolling chair around at high speeds knocking into everything. He knocked over the garbage cans and knocked some things off the bookshelf. Twice the chair tipped over and he fell on the floor. Two other boys were in the office at the time and they were laughing and egging him on. Each time I asked him to stop he'd tell me he was going to put the chair back and he would ride slowly back over towards my desk just to speed by it and go for another round of kamikaze antics.

I cornered him and asked him to get out of the chair. He refused and I told him I would squeeze a pressure point in his shoulder if he didn't. I had shown him in the first

week of school how I did this. He didn't move so I placed my hands on his shoulders. I told him to get up or I would squeeze.

He answered with extreme anger and emotion, "Bitch, you better not!"

"Then get up. If you don't, I'm gonna squeeze," I said in a very serious tone.

"Fuck you, I'm not getting up and I swear to God if you put pressure I'll bust your shit" he yelled.

I put a little bit of pressure.

"Goddamnit bitch! You better not touch me again!" Dennis threatened but did not move.

I put pressure again, but this time harder. Dennis sprang up out of the seat and ran to the door. I followed him and he stopped at the door and brought his hand up quickly towards my face as if he was going to hit me. I looked him squarely in the face and didn't move. Dennis turned around and ran into the boys bathroom. After about five minutes, I went in after him.

"Hey," he said in genuine surprised, "you are not allowed in here!"

"Oh well," I said.

Dennis headed into one of the stalls and looked back to see if I was going to follow.

"Nope," I said with a grin, "I'm not following you in there. You've found my limit."

Dennis broke into a smile. The tension was broken. Dennis came back in my office and we talked. This was a turning point with Dennis and me. He began to wear his admiration for me on his face. When I would walk into the classroom his face would light up. At first, feeling embarrassed or vulnerable, he used to act like he didn't want me to stay in the room. He and the other boys would tease me and tell me to go back to my office. I told them they were crazy, they all knew they wanted me to stay.

"No I don't," Dennis said in near panic. "Ask Mike, I don't like you. I don't like her do I Mike?"

Mike didn't answer. Alice called me over to her desk and pointed to Dennis' journal. His assignment was to tell who he respected the most in the world and why. It said: "The person I respect the most in the world is Ms. Smith because if you start trouble she will pinch your shoulders to smithereens."

What a strange way to win oneself into a young boy's heart.

New Agreements

A week or so later I was called to Dennis' class. Dennis had cut his toe and it had a big bandage on it. He had his shoe off and sat with it up on the desk. He had been throwing things and smashing things in the room. He was mad at Billy. He was barricaded in the far corner of the classroom still throwing obscenities and objects at Billy. Billy cursed back. Although only half of Dennis' size, he wasn't about to back down.

I asked Dennis to come with me and talk. He told me he wouldn't come talk because he already had two days suspension and was probably gonna get arrested. He said there wasn't any reason to talk now and he was going to stay in the room so he could kill Billy. His eyes were red and his face was screwed up in an agonized expression. Eventually I coaxed him to come out to the parking lot where we sat in my car and talked.

"I don't blame you for being upset," I said. "But don't you see that your whole life is going to be like this if you keep pushing the limits all the time. You're often in some kind of trouble. Do you see any reason why this would be the last time?" I asked.

In a voice that sounded very tired and discouraged he answered, "no."

"I've known a lot of kids in your position," I said softly. "Acting out their anger in ways that turn back on them. Many of them are in prison now. Two of them are dead. But there are others who have worked hard to understand themselves and get a hold of their

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anger. I could help you understand your anger and how it plays out in your life. It would mean trusting me, talking to me, and looking hard at the things that hurt you. How do you feel about what I am saying?" I asked.

"You're right about one thing," Dennis said with resignation, "I sure do fuck up my life."

"You want to work on trying to understand why?" I asked.

"Yes," he said in a barely audible voice.

"You want to start now?"

"I guess," Dennis answered.

"Tell me what happened with you and Billy today," I said. Dennis began to fabricate a story. I could tell he was not being completely honest by his halting speech and downcast eyes. He said that Billy had kicked in some of the windows of an abandoned mobile home near their bus stop. He said Billy encouraged him to do it too. Dennis said he wouldn't, but he was there watching when the school bus drove up. The driver had reported the incident to the school resource officer. Dennis blamed Billy for the whole thing. He said Billy shouldn't have done it and now he was gonna beat his ass for getting him in trouble.

"How'd you cut your foot?" I asked.

"Running away when the bus came around the corner. I accidentally kicked a piece of glass that had been knocked out already."

"I don't think you're telling me the truth," I said with some disappointment.

Dennis looked up and held my gaze. After a few seconds, he said, "If I do, you'll tell on me."

"No, I won't," I said. "This is already being investigated. You may get arrested for it or you may not. But what you tell me won't be repeated. I promise I won't ever tell the things you say to me unless you give me permission."

Dennis took a deep breath and told me the story. On a whim, he and Billy had kicked the windows out of a vacant, though not abandoned, mobile home. The bus driver had caught them in the act. Dennis got scared and tried to blame the whole thing on Billy. Now he didn't understand why, but he felt like he wanted to kill Billy.

"If you kicked those windows in, you have no one to blame but yourself," I said.

"I know," Dennis said as the tears welled up again. "I guess I owe Billy an apology. I just know my mom is gonna kill me. You don't know how she can be."

We talked for a while about what might happen. Dennis was still upset, but much calmer than he had been. He had been holding my keys and he put the key in the ignition of the car. "Can I crank her up?" He asked.

"Yeah," I said, "Be sure to hold the clutch in."

"I know how to start a car," Dennis said and proceeded to start it up. He let the engine idle for about a minute and then turned it off. On the way back to class he said, "You must really trust me to let me start your car."

"And you must really trust me to tell me about what happened this morning," I said. "Its got to go both ways."

Dennis missed the next three days of school because he had the flu. When he came back he brought me three meticulously drawn cartoon figures. One of them was a cute little dog with a blurp which read, "Trust me."

A Cool Kid

The next day Dennis sent a request form to see me. We went back to the parking lot to talk. My office had the only phone in the department and there was little privacy. He told me of a home life that was riddled with violence and alcoholism. He told me of being taken out of the house for abuse when he was younger and living in a foster home. He said he knew his mom loved him, but she had problems. He talked about his mother and described someone who seemed so strikingly like himself that I was amazed that he didn't notice the parallels. I asked him in what ways he and his mother were different and

he sat with his eyes closed thinking for a long while. Finally he looked at me with an amused grin. "The only difference, I guess, is that she has ovaries."

I smiled and asked, "Anything else?"

"Yeah," he said, "She never sits down with anybody like this and tries to talk things out. She just bitches and hits. She never listens and talks."

"So by talking with me," I asked, "You are making a part of yourself that is different from your mother?"

"Something like that," Dennis said.

Dennis said that sometimes he felt like he wanted to kill his mom because she made him so mad. "But I make her mad sometimes too, and I like that. She gets so mad she can't stand to look at me and so she kicks me out of the house and I get to do whatever I want for a couple of days. I get my way."

He told me he really didn't like how it felt to smoke pot and that he only did it to impress his friends. "I lie about it, too," Dennis said. "I don't do half of the stuff I say I do. I just want my friends to think I'm cool. The other guys lie, too. Lots of time I know they're lying."

"You are very honest and smart about people," I said.

"I can't believe I am telling you all this stuff," Dennis said. "I've never talked to anyone like this. I trust you more than anyone in the world.." After some thought he added, "I trust Mike too. He's my best friend."

When it got time to go back in, I told Dennis that I really had enjoyed our conversation and that I thought he was a cool kid.

"Why do you think I'm cool," he asked.

"I think you're cool cause you're smart and funny and because you are willing to take chances by talking to me. And you have worked hard to earn my trust. I like the way you smile and talk and play. I like that you took the time to draw those cartoons for me. It shows me that you are a caring person. I think you're cool just because you're you."

Dennis sat quietly and closed his eyes. He seemed like he was letting it all sink in. Then he turned to me and asked with complete sincerity, "You mean that I don't have to smoke, and curse, and use drugs to be cool?"

"Nope, you are just naturally cool," I said. I reached over and muffled his hair. "Lets get back. Its almost time to go to the bus and you have to get your things from the classroom."

"I can't believe we talked for so long!" he said with more than a little satisfaction.

A pretty happy kid boarded the bus that afternoon--a cool kid.

Dennis' Storying of Self

Shortly after this time Dennis began to write his autobiography. He named it "The Story of my Life and Thoughts." In all, over the course of the year, he wrote 158 pages about his life. He was a very good writer and once he trusted me, there was no limit. He found himself waking up in the middle of the night and writing. He wrote when we had arguments. He wrote about problems he was having at home and school. He wrote about abuse, violence, alcoholism and he wrote about his fears and his dreams. He wrote about questions that played with his mind, about falling in love, about why God created poor people and about how he hated being cooped up in the same classroom all day. As he wrote his life, as he created his life in story, he began to see himself in new ways.

In his writing and our conversations Dennis began to see that there were reasons for the ways he acted. He began to realize that the craziness was not simply just in him, but all around him both at school and at home. By the end of the school year Dennis had clarified what was bothering him the most. He wanted to go live with his Dad, but he didn't want to hurt his mother. He was sacrificing his life for her. Near the end of the school year Dennis ran away from home and went to a runaway shelter. From there he went to live with his father and the following year he was staffed out of SED. But I am getting ahead of myself here. There's one more story.

All the Crazy People in One Room

Although Dennis was making great progress with me, he was still having trouble at home and in the classroom. One day about mid-year he was suspended for five days for calling Ms. Tyler a fat old bitch and knocking all her stuff off her desk. I wasn't in that day and I hadn't spoken to Dennis, so I had no idea what Ms. Tyler might have said or done to Dennis first. There is no place to describe teacher's behaviors on referral forms. That the student is solely responsible for all conflict is a given, especially if that student has been labeled "severely emotionally disturbed."

A meeting had been set up with Dennis, his mother, Alice, Mildred, Brenda and me. I had a bad feeling in my stomach as I walked up to the meeting. I was a few minutes late. When I walked in, Brenda was telling Dennis' mother that discipline had to begin in the home and how important it was to be consistent and to have consequences for his behavior. Then she told Dennis that his behavior was completely unacceptable and that he was going to have to cooperate with us or he would be put on homebound education. She told him what nice teachers he had and how we all wanted to work with him so he could get out of SED. "You do want to get out of SED, don't you?" Brenda asked Dennis. Dennis did not answer. "Everyone wants to work with you Dennis so you can get out of this program. We are here to help you, but you have to help yourself. Surely you want to get out of SED."

Brenda was trying to make him feel ashamed of being in SED as if it was something he had done all by himself and as if disturbed emotions or behavior belonged only to him and to no one else in the room. Dennis' mother threatened to slap him right there in front of everyone if he didn't answer. So he answered. He said, "I don't know."

"You don't know?" his mother asked as the anger shot from her eyes.

Dennis turned his back towards the group. His eyes teared up. Brenda ordered him to turn around and face the group, but he didn't move. She told that he was going to have to work with us.

Both Dennis and his mother wore the same seething anger. Their eyes were red and wet. Brenda barely betrayed her anger in her skillfully controlled voice. But her eyes, sharp and cold, told much more. I had my own rage, boiling up in me like a volcano about to erupt.

Brenda then asked Alice if she had anything to say. She had been coached. She was told that she needed to take control of her class and make a strong stand. Alice got up and walked around in front of Dennis. She put on a tough voice and said, "Things are going to change in our classroom, Dennis. We are going to go over the rules everyday and they are going to be enforced much stricter. There will be no profanity, no hitting, no throwing objects. You will finish all assignments and follow directions the first time they are given. You will stay in your seat. You will address others with respect. Do you understand me? I would appreciate an answer."

Dennis stole a glance at me and then quickly looked down. I think in that moment he hated Alice. Where was Billy when we needed him? I had to fight the temptation of picking her up and carrying her out of the room myself.

Next I was asked if I had anything to say. I told the group that Dennis was doing some incredible things. I showed them his folder that was full of his writing and artwork. I told them he was one of the most honest students I had ever worked with and that he was making a very sincere effort to understand himself. I began to give examples of the good things I was seeing and Brenda cut me off.

"Well, that's nice Ms. Smith," Brenda said to me and turned abruptly away and spoke to Dennis, "We all know you have promise Dennis. However, you have to behave for people other than Ms. Smith or you'll just keep getting suspended. We can't tolerate your unruly behavior in this school and if you're not here you won't be able to talk to Ms. Smith now will you?"

This made me furious. And people said Dennis was manipulative. I was being used as a pawn to gain Dennis' compliance. This was the driving force of the level

system. Anything or anyone who the student showed interest in or cared for was commandeered as an "incentive" to gain his compliance or coerce him to behave as if everything was O.K.

The final straw came when Brenda asked Mildred Tyler if she had anything to say. She had sat there with her arms folded and that infamous scowl for the whole meeting. She told Dennis how much she cared for him and how she had tried so hard to work with him. But, he just wouldn't let her. She said she just couldn't put up with him taking all his anger out on her anymore. Dennis had already turned his back on the group, but with this he turned away a little more. Mildred Tyler, the innocent victim. Something was very wrong with this picture.

Dennis' mother told Dennis he was on restriction until his next report card came out and if there wasn't some big improvement, he'd be on restriction again. At this point Dennis started to speak and she told him to shut his damn mouth. Perhaps she was responding to Brenda's earlier admonishment to get tougher, that discipline had to begin in the home. Brenda had no idea how tough things were in that home. She had no idea how much punishment Dennis had in his life. She just assumed he needed more.

The last order of business was to wipe out Dennis' enormous debt of "bonus bucks." These were the tokens of the level system. This move was the school social worker's idea. He thought Dennis needed a fresh start. It was meant to get Dennis back into a position where the incentives in the behavior modification plan would be enticing to him again. Although wrought with good intentions, I wondered what he thought might be different this time. Dennis let himself get so far in debt with bonus bucks to be out of reach of Mildred's control. He had removed himself from engagement, just like he had done in this meeting.

As I sat at the meeting I felt hatred. I felt like cursing at them, throwing books, knocking over the table. I felt like shaking them and telling them to look at their own

selves. I felt the kind of rage Dennis often unleashed rising up in me like a flood. But I was not as honest as Dennis, nor as brave.

Trying to Figure Out Whose Crazy

As I sat there in that meeting listening to Brenda tell Dennis that everyone wanted to help him to get out of SED I was overcome by the absurdity of it and angry as hell by the cruelty of it. Here was Alice, Mildred, Brenda and Dennis' mother telling him they were going to help him become un-severely emotionally disturbed. But from my vantage point, he was the least disturbed one of the batch. He was capable of a certain self-honesty that seemed to me to evade these others, he was kinder, and more mutual in relationship. So either Dennis was severely emotionally disturbed and so was I for not seeing it or there was another kind of craziness going on here that was more subtle and pervasive.

The thing that amazed me the most was that Dennis was the only one whose behavior could be discussed. It would have been very "inappropriate" of me to bring up Mildred's hatred for Dennis at this meeting, or Alice's inability to connect with the kids or take responsibility for her own behavior. It would have been even more inappropriate for me to question the role Brenda's punitive style played in this whole thing, or her need for someone to unleash her anger on. It would have been inappropriate for me to ask Dennis' mother why she allowed her alcoholic boyfriend to mentally and physically abuse Dennis or how she thought her own violent temper might somehow contribute to Dennis' own. It would have even been inappropriate for me to talk about my own severe emotional disturbance, how crazy this meeting was making me, and how absolutely furious I felt.

No, Dennis was the one who was severely emotionally disturbed. He cursed and threw things, knocked over desks, turned his back on people in meetings, refused to talk, to play his part. He did not know how to control his anger. He was the one who was going to have to change. To act appropriately. The disturbance was located in Dennis. No

other disturbance could be talked about, made visible. Dennis wore it and it was his alone. This had been accomplished in a naming ceremony years ago, when Dennis was given the name severely emotionally disturbed. That's when we took all of the disturbance, the severe emotional disturbance, and placed it inside of Dennis.

Locating Severe Emotional Disturbance

One of the criticisms of psychological diagnosis and labeling is that it poses the "problem" inside of one person. There are supposed to be *objective* ways to determine such things. Once we have identified the place of disturbance as being within Dennis, we set out to change Dennis by using a system of behavior modification. The idea is for Dennis to act like he is not disturbed, not angry, not hurting. We reward him for these behaviors. However, if he continues to act in ways we identify as *severely emotionally disturbed,* then he has to pay the consequences for these actions. So even though we tell him he is SED, he gets punished when he acts like he is.

What if we changed the location of the disturbance? After all we placed it in Dennis pretty easily; a few psychological tests and a few anecdotal records. Dennis was angry, aggressive, acting out, crazy. That was as far as we looked. But maybe we could think about it differently. Maybe Dennis is just like the rest of us, but perhaps a bit more honest? What if the school culture is crazy, or the system, or the artificial relationships that comprise the "system?" Maybe the way we are thinking about and talking about Dennis is crazy.

Here are some thoughts inspired by theorists who locate the disturbance in places other than individual children.

Theories Which Help me Feel a Little Less Crazy

"There is no madness but that which is in every man...."
(Foucault, Madness & Civilization, p. 26)

In my experiences within schools I found few people who saw education or students the way I did. However, I have been comforted to find a rapidly increasing number writers, theorists, and philosophers whose ideas about education are in line with my seeing and experience. These writers' ideas have helped me make sense of the crazy world of education.

Crazy Systems

Larry Spence (1978) tells us that hierarchical institutions are inherently pathological institutions. He says that it is impossible to control human behavior in a strict sense and that any institution which is premised on the control of human beings produces double-bind situations. Double-binds are situations which have contradictory requirements and thus, no matter what action an individual takes, there is a price to pay. Double-binds are thought to be crazy-making situations. Bateson used the concept of double-binds as a factor in schizophrenia. Spence says that in hierarchies, by nature, produce such double-binds as the requirements of those above and those below naturally become more and more at odds over time.

Young (1990) tells us that one can have control over others' actions hierarchy, but not one's own. In this way, it is possible to be an agent of power without actually having power. Furthermore, Spence tells us that those people who are charged with the responsibility of trying to control others behavior, either end up for hating those who they try to control due to their resistance to being controlled, or they hate themselves for being too weak to control them, or both.

These theorists help me understand some of the crazy behaviors of teachers and administrators in relationship to students like Dennis who refuse to be easily controlled. Their resistance turns up the intensity, the stakes, the emotions of everyone whose sense of competence is based on their ability to control students. Perhaps the students in SED classes do not own the craziness at all, perhaps they just provoke the institutional insanity out into the light, into awareness.

Cruelty and Objectivity

It seems cruel to me that Dennis would bear all the disturbance inside himself, that he alone was singled out of all those in the meeting, as being severely emotionally disturbed. His identity had been constructed as flawed. What was worse, we seemed to be taking the person with the least power among us (the child) and making him the only one responsible to change. He seemed to be bearing all the burden, all the responsibility, all the disturbance. It seemed to me we were blaming the victim.

Rhodes (1994) gives us insight into how our beliefs about reality contribute to institutional cruelty. He tells us that the myth of objectivity often acts as a means to hide our own involvement in cruelty even from ourselves. Rhodes says that special educators often face the unrecognized cruelty inherent in present school practices and structures in relationship to their students. However, if teachers point out instances of this cruelty, they are told that what they see as cruelty is a necessary side-effect of maintaining order and objectivity of the system. Rhodes writes:

> The reciprocators, or mutual exchangers, hide from themselves their relational contribution and involvement in the disorder process. In doing so, they use objectivity as their defense for institutional cruelty. The see the child as subjective, and themselves as objective. The child is disorderly all alone. They are uninvolved in the disorder going on "out there" in the child. Their participation is repressed from consciousness.

As I sat in that meeting and watched and listened as the various adults in the room told Dennis what was expected or him and what would happen if he did not cooperate, I was struck by the cruelty involved. Somehow based on an unspoken institutional logic, the behavior of those people who represented "the system," was beyond question. Dennis was given the sole responsibility to change, while the teachers were exonerated.

The behaviors of those represented the system were sanctioned and above eproach. No matter how negative everyone thought Mildred was, no one threatened her

with not getting a paycheck if she didn't act the way we thought she should. No one told her she was crazy. No one called her family and told them they had better do something with her. No one threatened to kick her out of the school. Instead paid her color in designs, complain all day long, and to hate. Who said behavior modification systems reflect real world incentives and punishments? Mildred was proof that was not so.

Stone (1992) tells how an underlying belief in objectivity results in knowledge being used as control. Objectivity involves a stance towards others in which they become the "objects" of our study. The gaze is outward, away from the self. We become spectators of others' disturbance, never our own. By labeling Dennis as severely emotionally disturbed, we used our knowledge as a means to define Dennis as "other" than ourselves and this definition of his being became the justification of our extreme measures to control him. In this, Dennis is not alone. Knitzer et al (1990) conducted an extensive study of SED programs around the country and found that they were dominated by a curriculum of control. This control is justified by our appraisal that we know the truth about these students and the truth is they are, objectively, severely emotionally disturbed. However, Rorty (1989, p. 5) tells us:

> Truth cannot be out there--cannot exist independently of the human mind--because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not.

The "truth" about Dennis and other students who we have labeled severely emotionally disturbed or any other label for that matter, does not according to Rorty's logic, exist within these students, is not an essential part of their being. Rather, we make truths with our language, our meanings. As long as we mistake our thoughts about reality for reality, we can justify nearly any type of cruelty.

Another Look at Repression

Dennis was not supposed to recognize that he was being hurt in this. Nor was I supposed to recognize it. How did the other adults in the room not see it? How could they

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continue to participate in this type of coercive treatment and manipulation without reflection on their contribution to the severely disturbing environment of the school? How could Mildred not see that hating Dennis impacted his behavior? How could Alice not see that allowing students to run all over her was not Mildred's fault, but her own, and also contributed to the "craziness" in the classroom in major ways? How could Brenda not see that her terrorist tactics, her strategies of dividing and conquering, and her strong need to control others, induced resentment and fear? How could Dennis' mother not connect the abuse at home to his behavior at school?

Alice Miller's (1990, 1986) work has helped me make sense of many of the dynamics that come into play in order to repress awareness of the cruelty that often occurs within families and schools. Miller (1990) points out that psychoanalytic drive theory has posited the child as containing negative forces within him/herself that must be thwarted. She provides story after story from educators and parents that speak of their goal to accomplish the taming of this willful nature. In this view the child is always wrong and the adult is always right.

As Miller (1990) explores the history of the conditions of childhood she reveals how beliefs in the child's basically "bad" nature, derived from both religion and psychology, have encouraged a manner of child rearing that is often cruel and abusive, yet strangely enough sincerely believed to be in the child's best interest. After all, the logic goes, "I was raised this way, and look how good I turned out."

Miller explores how the repression of awareness of one's own subjugation is accomplished in child rearing processes and then echoed throughout one's life, one's relationships, and in once interactions in society. Miller (1990) writes:

> This is the rule, for the more or less conscious goal of adults in rearing infants is to make sure they will never find out later in life that they were trained not to become aware of how they were manipulated. Without "poisonous pedagogy" there would be no "poisonous psychoanalysis, for

patients would react negatively from the beginning if they were misunderstood, ignored, not listened to, or belittled in order to be forced into a Procrustean bed of theories. (p. 20)

Miller contends that if we are not permitted to recognize and react to the cruelty in our own upbringing, that we will have no means to develop a critical awareness of other forms of cruel manipulation. She believes that the conditions of our upbringing and education set us up to be used. She says:

> This perfect adaptation to society's norms--in other words, to what is called "healthy normality"--carries with it the danger that such a person can be used for practically any purpose. It is not a loss of autonomy that occurs here, because this autonomy never existed, but a switching of values, which in themselves are of no importance anyway for the person in question as long as his whole value system is dominated by the principle of obedience.
>
> For children who have grown up being assailed for qualities the parents hate in themselves can hardly wait to assign these qualities to someone else so they can once again regard themselves as good, "moral," noble, and altruistic. Such projections can easily become part of any Weltanschauung.
>
> The pedagogical conviction that one must bring a child into line from the outset has its origin in the need to split off the disquieting parts of the inner self and project them onto an available object. The child's great plasticity, flexibility, defenselessness, and availability make it the idea object for this projection. The enemy within can at last be hunted down on the outside. (p. 11)

While adults who were never *allowed* to own their own anger or recognize their own pain may project the unowned aspects of their self on children, they still may react as

children themselves to authority. Teachers who interact within the system through an underlying dynamic of obedience, will demand obedience of their own students. That is part of what is required from the authorities. If they are unable to question the dictates of the system, they will not be able to allow their students to question the dictates in their classrooms. They do not so much try to control their students of their own volition, but out of a deference for authority. In a sense this allows them to absolve themselves of personal responsibility and guilt. If the decision is not theirs to make, then they are not responsible for their part in the diffuse web of power and control. Miller (1986) writes:

> Our whole system of raising and educating children provides the power-hungry with a ready-made railway network they can use to reach the destination of their choice. They need only push the buttons that parents and educators have already installed. (p.20)

In raising children up to conform, to never question, to never notice or speak of their own or others pain inflicted by the hands of those in authority, teachers often lure students into traps in which they themselves have not only been contained, but also maimed.

Miller (1990) sees the repression of anger achieved through punishment and threat of abandonment in childhood as source of the violence in the world. She tells us:

> A person who can understand and integrate his anger as part of himself will not become violent. He has the need to strike out at others only if he is thoroughly unable to understand his rage, if he was not permitted to become familiar with this feeling as a small child, was never able to experience it as part of himself because such a thing was totally unthinkable in his surroundings. (p.65)

Miller believes that once children are allowed to express their anger they begin to be able to integrate it. It no longer seeps out in violent outbursts. They become aware of attempts to manipulate them and respond by protesting against their ill treatment. Children who are allowed to be aware of and speak out against their own oppression

grow up to trust their own judgments even when they do not necessarily jive with the official story of what is going on. In other words, they become more empowered to think and see from their own position, instead of denying their own perspective in obedience to another's view.

If we are to believe Miller, then the curriculum of control (Knitzer et al, 1990) so heavily employed in SED programs actually works against students best interests. Their protests against their cruel treatment is a sign of their emotional viability and strength. In Miller's view, it is those who feel compelled to drive this willfulness from students, those who have never been given permission to question authority, those whose own abuse is unresolved, who have disturbed emotions. What is ironic and sad from this view is the very methods we employ as a means to "fix" students is what contributes to their emotional disturbance. In short, our response to students we have identified as severely emotional disturbed is abusive.

Ethics of Conformity

Spence tells us that an underlying ethics of conformity is the essential glue of hierarchy. Conforming to the dictates of those above us in the hierarchy, since they have more power and supposedly more knowledge, is considered morally virtuous. Responsibility for one's actions in a hierarchy are not with the self. Young (1990) tells us that in bureaucracy one is has power over others but not self. In this way no one has to take responsibility. We are simply carrying out orders. In these types of systems compliance equals ethics. Anyone who questions questions the integrity of the whole system, questions the experts, and such questioning is not only considered dangerous, but undermining and unethical. I can tell you that I was considered remiss in my responsibilities towards the students and the school when I did not mete out swift consequences for "inappropriate" behaviors.

I think the group of people gathered in the meeting for Dennis needed to believe that the pain they continuously imposed on Dennis, the pain of being labeled, suspended,

restricted, shunned, shamed, and manipulated, were for his own good. Anyone who did not go with the flow, who did not pretend that what we were doing with Dennis was for his own good, was considered a trouble maker.. Both Dennis and I were trouble makers. In hierarchies, anyone who disturbs the outward appearance of order is judged as being engaged in an immoral act. The moral indignation at my approach, letting students curse, letting students complain, letting students voice their pain and anger and not automatically sticking up for the adult was viewed as undermining, irresponsible and immoral. The child was supposed to take the fall and no one was supposed to recognize this as being cruel. It is not surprising that these are also the rules of abusive families.

Story as Research

I was not kidding when I told you I was severely emotionally disturbed. However now that you have heard my stories, perhaps some of my severe emotional disturbance has begun to make sense you. This has often happened with my students and me. What at first glance appears as bizarre ways of thinking and being begin to make sense within the stories of lives, families, and schools. In this regard, story is very powerful language.

In recent years, several educational researchers, theorists, and philosophers have begun to embrace story as an important medium for inquiring into education (Ayers, 1992; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Gitlin & Russell, 1994; Gitlin et al, 1992; Griffith, 1995; Isenberg, 1994; Noddings, 1991), as well as an important means of transforming education (Kinchloe, 1991; McLaren 1989). Storying experience can help us understand ourselves and others (Cooper, 1991), can help us take responsibility for our moral actions (Tappan & Brown, 1991), and can help us break out of long engrained notions of "the way it is" (Lather, 1994). Beyond this, story can bring us comfort (Isenberg, 1994) and insight (Cooper, 1991; Grummet, 1991), and provoke us to take action (Isenberg, 1994; Gitlin and Russell, 1994). It is through story that we breathe meaning into experience.

When students and teachers begin to tell their stories of schooling, we begin to participate in constructing what education means. Although this process is constrained by

hierarchical structures and positivist philosophies of knowledge, story can take us beyond those constraints into new places of possibility.

Storying Difference

Bruner (1990) tells us that narrative is born in difference. When what happens is not what we expect to happen based on our folk psychology, we bridge the space between expectation and experience with a story about the difference that gives meaning to the unexpected. Bruner explains that when things go as are expected there is no need to say anything, the meaning has already been determined; things are as they *should* be. When things do not meet expectations, narrative is used to explain the *difference*.

In this view, by constructing new stories we can construct new possibilities for education. Stories can function to facilitate educational change. Storying experience allows one the space to veer from the expectations ingrained in notions of "the way it is," to imagine the "way it could be." Story frees one up to act differently, to try new ways, because story can situate difference in contexts of thought, human intention, feeling, culture, and individuality, in which they have meaning and purpose.

In educational discourse, the kind of language that has been considered legitimate in our *professional* culture has been largely an authoritative spectator language which alligns itself with *The Truth* and uses knowledge as control (Stone, 1992). In education, for the most part, theoretical language has been privileged and the language of story has been ignored (Isenberg, 1994; Griffith, 1995). Storying our experiences allows us to move away from relying on knowledge constructed separate from ourselves and our relationships, into a place of connected knowing, and ultimately into a place of greater responsibility and freedom.

A Final Warning

I have told many stories about severe emotional disturbance. I have shared it with you. And I wonder when all is said and done who and what you think is crazy. I must warn you to be extremely careful as you contemplate these stories. Do not come too close

to the dis-ease. I have come to believe it is contagious, this severe emotional disturbance, and I've heard that there is no known cure.

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